



# Poetry and Community in the Work of José Ángel Valente

Manus O'Dwyer

The 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1972 saw a unique event in the history of Spanish literature – a poet's work was deemed sufficiently seditious for him to be brought before a military tribunal and court-marshalled. The poet was José Ángel Valente (1929-2000); the text, a short prose work entitled "El uniforme del general" [The general's uniform]. Valente was one of the major poets of what in Spanish literary history is termed the "generación del 50" (the 1950's generation), the second generation of poets after the Spanish civil war. His career stretches from the publication of his first collection of poetry, *A modo de esperanza* [By way of hope], in 1955, to the posthumous publication of his *Fragmentos de un libro futuro* [Fragments of a future book], in 2001. Apart from the poetical works, Valente's collected essays, amounting to over 1500 pages, contain some of the most influential reflections on poetry written in Spanish in the second half of the twentieth century.

"El uniforme del general" was first published in 1971 by a minor Majorcan publishing house as one of five short stories collectively titled *Número trece* [Number 13]. It made reference to a real story Valente had heard of a village labourer who was executed for dressing up in the uniform of a Nationalist army general during the Civil War. This parodic wearing of the uniform occurred during the occupation of the general's house, which had been abandoned in Republican territory in the first years of the conflict. In Valente's version of the story, the labourer, denounced and condemned to death on the arrival of the Nationalist forces, carries out a final act of defiance by drawing the



picture of the uniform on his cell wall and urinating on it. Though Valente's text was written without explicit reference to real people and locations, the story was sufficiently recognizable for him to be charged with an *ofensa a clase determinada del ejército* [insult to a given rank of the army], a charge for which he would be tried in a military court. Valente was found guilty of the charges and court-marshalled *in absentia*, while the publisher of the text, Juan José Armas Marcelo, was deprived of his job as a teacher and placed under house arrest for 14 months<sup>1</sup>.

Living in Geneva at the time of his sentencing, the major consequence for the poet was the invalidation of his passport, effectively rendering him a stateless person. Unable to safely return to Spain, Valente's freedom to travel was limited until the revocation of his sentence on the passing of the Francoist dictatorship in 1975. Valente's experience as someone placed outside of the structures of the state is apt, given what could be described as a dominant ethos that informs his writing from the beginning of his career: a commitment to the experience of outsiders, exiles, and others, those who in the twentieth century were most vulnerable to the violence of totalitarian states. From the beginning of his career, Valente defends the figure of the outsider, and many of the essays are concerned with defending a vision of Iberian history in sympathy with a heterodox, exilic experience and culture. Complementing this ethical commitment to alterity is a theory of poetic language, developed throughout the decade of the 1960s, in which Valente defends the capacity of poetry to reveal aspects of reality, and to allow for the emergence of voices, that are hidden or silenced by what he terms the "totalizing" or "crystallizing" language of ideology. Valente combines these two strands of his thought in key essays from the late 1960s, which turn around the figure of Sophocle's Antigone. Antigone, who chooses family loyalty over political duty, represents for Valente all those who are cast as outsiders in the development of totalizing state powers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Details of the incident can be found in Claudio Rodríguez Fer's biographical *Valente Vital: Ginebra, Saboya, París* (2014: 236-255).

Valente's championing of the outsider figure clashes, however, with other aspects of his poetics, which betray more the influence in his work of powerful Romantic conceptions of the nature of poetic language. In this context, Valente on occasion defends a more conservative poetics, according to which the community would be founded on the Word before the word, what Valente terms the *antepalabra* [beforeword]. The descriptions of a return along a genealogical path towards a generative but unspeakable *logos* that appear in Valente's essays and poetry imply an ultimately exclusionary metaphysics that seems to contradict his anti-totalitarian ethos. In this article I will explore Valente's work in light of these tensions, and draw out their relevance to contemporary philosophical discourses on the relations between poetry, society, and community. I will begin with Valente's readings of Sophocle's *Antigone*, move to an analysis of his early poetry in light of these, and conclude with a discussion of the erotic writings that form an important part of the later collections. I will frame these questions in terms of the work of Judith Butler, but also in the context of the discourse on community of Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito

## Antigone and the Creation of History

Some of Valente's most important reflections on the social and political efficacy of poetry are contained in the two essays he dedicates to *Antigone*, one published in 1968 ("Ideología y Lenguaje" in *Ínsula*), and the other in 1969 ("La respuesta de Antígona" in *Papeles de Son Ármadans*). Both readings are closely related. In the later text, Valente frames Antigone's sacrifice, her refusal to bend to the exigencies of the state and deny her dead brother the rites of burial, in terms of the achievement of a new horizon of possibility for historical experience<sup>2</sup>. According to Valente,

---

<sup>2</sup> Valente's writings on *Antigone* forms part of the long tradition of readings and adaptations of the play since the Romantic movement. George

parece naturaleza de héroe trágico romper con su sacrificio los condicionamientos históricos que le han dado existencia para abrir una nueva posibilidad temporal, una nueva expectativa humana [it seems to be the nature of the tragic hero to break with their sacrifice the historical conditions within which they exist in order to open new temporal possibilities, new human expectations] (OCII: 69).<sup>3</sup>

If, in the Periclean model of the state, the civic law (justice) coincides with the law of the revealed Gods (truth), in Sophocle's tragedy it is Antigone's task to deny this truth, to fight against the Gods of the city so as to reveal heretofore unknown Gods and historical possibilities. As Valente writes:

Antígona existe para forzar una nueva manifestación de lo divino que, en última instancia, es decir, en la culminación del sacrificio trágico, consiste en la sanción de una nueva órbita de human libertad" [Antigone exists in order to force a new manifestation of the divine which, in the last instance, that is, at the culmination of the tragic sacrifice, consists in the sanctioning of a new orbit for human freedom] (OCII: 76).

In an interesting twist on dominant interpretations of the tragedy, Valente does not consign Antigone to the realm of the pre-political; rather, for the Galician poet, she is the only character in the drama who is capable of creating historical change, she is the «creadora de historia, de devenir» [creator of history, of becoming](OCII: 75).

Valente's reading of Antigone coincides to some degree with Judith Butler's reading of the play, and her criticism of the two influential interpretations of it – those of Hegel and Lacan – in her series of short essays, *Antigone's Claim*. In the Hegelian reading, Antigone stands for the kinship relationships that must be partially overcome so that the adult male citizen can come into being. The mother must give

---

Steiner's *Antigones* (1984) remains a standard introduction to the enormous literature on, and adaptations of, Sophocle's text.

<sup>3</sup> All translations of Valente's work are my own.

up her son so that he may fight for the polis, a process that she resists, thus becoming both the foundation and the enemy of the state, the «everlasting irony of the community»<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, for Lacan, the realm of the Symbolic (a quasi-transcendental category, not natural but at the same time not contingent or social), is derived from the incest taboo, the universal norm that transforms biological relations into cultural ones. In Lacan's theory, transcendental kinship relations, ultimately derived from the incest taboo, determine the linguistic structures of the Symbolic, which are themselves the basis of social life. Thus Antigone, who for Lacan displays an incestuous attachment to her brother, speaks from an impossible subject position with regard to the transcendental symbolic structures of kinship, and her destruction is the consequence of the sheer incoherence of her enunciative position.

Butler problematizes Hegel and Lacan's approaches to Antigone, arguing that they both ignore the fact that we can «critically assess the status of these rules that govern cultural intelligibility but are not reducible to a given culture» (Butler 2000: 17). In the context of kinship relationships, the contemporary legalization of gay marriage and, perhaps more subversively, the recognition of familial structures that do not coincide with the strictures of marriage, demonstrate the possibility of refiguring what are perceived in modern thought as necessary structures for cultural intelligibility and reproduction. Antigone, in this regard, would be «precisely the one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges within the intelligible, a position within kinship that is no position» (*ibid.*:78). In this way, Antigone performs in her naming of relations that are beyond cultural intelligibility the ultimately political

---

<sup>4</sup> Hegel's phrase is the title of Irigaray's well known discussion on the play in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985: 214-226). Butler's approach differs from that of Irigaray's in that it avoids the investment of female corporal difference that is at the heart of Irigaray's work. For a collection of feminist writings on *Antigone*, many of which elaborate on the problematics of theories of feminine corporal specificity as against the social construction of gender see *Feminist Readings of Antigone* (2010).

act, which is to question the founding pre-political categories upon which the polis is founded. As Butler remarks (2000: 82):

If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catechresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, when kinship founders on its own founding laws.

Butler's reading of *Antigone* also coincides in some ways with Valente's other reading of the play, which approaches it in the more specific terms of a theory of language, his article, written in 1968, "Ideología y lenguaje" [Ideology and language]. Here the «inflación del estado» [inflation of the state] (OCII: 76) implies a necessary occlusion of those forces that resist a totalizing order. Creon's language is, for Valente, similar to that which inhabits any totalizing social order; it is what Henri Lefebvre (1966), who Valente quotes, terms *discours*, a reified public language that Antigone's words, which are «de raíz poética» [radically poetic] (OCII: 76) denounce<sup>5</sup>. It is in this sense that Valente argues for the political efficacy of poetic language, which would not have to conform to the strictures of social realism in order to be politically significant. For Valente, following Lefebvre, ideology is the naturalization of relations that are in fact social, and implies a reified *discours* for its operation; the genuinely political act is to reveal the contingency of a given social order, and one of the ways of doing this is to create linguistic artefacts that rupture a given way of speaking. The poet's task in this context is to reveal new linguistic possibilities that would imply the possibility of a new social order, new divisions between the political and the non-political, or, ultimately, the utopian

---

<sup>5</sup> Valente takes from Lefebvre's Marxist theory of the reification of language discussed in *Le langage et la société*. There are two editions of this work in Valente's library, which is held by the University of Santiago de Compostela: the French edition from 1966 and the Spanish edition from 1967.

destruction of the very division itself. In the context of our reading of Antigone, this possibility is related to the irruption within the political of those who, according to the divisions upon which the political sphere is raised, have no voice within it, someone who, like Antigone, as Butler puts it, «is dead in some sense and yet speaks» (Butler 2000: 77).

Thus Valente can argue that the political import of his work, in the context of the post-war Spain in which he writes, lies in the attempt to create a poetic language that would resist a Francoist public language which he would later describe as constituting a linguistic «estado de ocupación» [state of occupation] (OCII: 1216). It is important to note, however, that Valente identifies this corruption of language not only as a characteristic of society under the fascist Spanish dictatorship, but also characteristic of contemporary neo-liberal governments, the democratic bases of which were, for Valente, more than suspect<sup>6</sup>. It is important to remember, also, that in the context of Spanish history, the figure of Antigone is especially important, as her ethical stance is based on a desire to declare publically a grief that can find no legitimate expression within the polis<sup>7</sup>. It is impossible not to link this desire to the

---

<sup>6</sup> As Valente notes in his interventions to the congress “40 anni di poesia in spagna: tra realism e avanguardia,” which took place from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, 1976 in Venice: «En regimens fascistas, cuya natureleza totalitarian es manifiesta, el poder opera sobre el lenguaje brutal y directamente, mediante sistemas de censura o incluso de eliminación física. En otros sistemas se actúa sobre el lenguaje por manipulación indirecta, ocupando el lenguaje – gracias, en gran parte, a los llamados *mass media* – con contenidos prefabricados, con paquetes de información (packaged information)» [In fascist regimes, in which totalitarianism is manifest, power operates on language in a brutal and direct way, in systems of censorship or even physical elimination. In other systems it acts on language through indirect means, occupying language – thanks in part to the so-called mass media – with prefabricated content, with packaged information] (OCII: 1219-1220). We might turn here to a contemporary, neoliberal version of this institutionalized language, the “bankspeak” described by Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre (2015).

<sup>7</sup> The philosopher Maria Zambrano, a friend and philosophical guide for Valente, also wrote on Antigone in these years. Significantly, the action in her

contemporary silencing of the suffering of the losing side in the Civil War, and the fact that, even today, the bodies of the victims of violence lie in unmarked graves throughout the country. Perhaps no figure exemplifies the injustice of a society in which the victims of violence cannot receive proper burial than that of Lorca, to whom Valente dedicates the following memorial in *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*:

Desde Granada subimos hasta Víznar. Vagamos por el borde sombrío del barranco - ¿Dónde?, decíamos. Era el otoño. Los hermanos, las viudas, los hijos de los muertos venían con grandes ramos. Entraban en el bosque y los depositaban en algún lugar, inciertos, tanteantes. ¿En dónde había sucedido? – Lo mataron a él, decía la mujer, pero también mataron a otros muchos, a tantos, a esos que ahora nadie ya recuerda. – Él ya no es él, le dije. Es el nombre que toma la memoria, no extingible, de todos.

(*Víznar*, 1988)

From Granada we ascend towards Víznar. We tarry along the dark edge of the cliff. "Where?" we asked. It was autumn. Brothers, widows, children of the dead came with large wreaths. They entered the forest and laid them in various places, uncertain, tentative. Where had it happened? "They killed him," the woman said, "but they also killed so many others, those that no-one now remembers." "He is no longer he," I told her. "His name now stands for the non-extinguishable memory of all those who died."

(*Víznar*, 1988)

(OCI: 558)

The body of Lorca, like the unburied body of Polyneices, becomes the figure through which a grief that could not find legitimate expression within the Francoist state begins to speak, and reflects the

---

*La tumba de Antígona* (1967) takes place within the tomb of Antigone, a gesture that reflects the preoccupation with giving voice to the disappeared.



way in which, for Valente, the subversion of language and the exploration of the enunciative complexity of testifying for the victims of violence constitutes the political task of the poet within his community.

## The Figuration of Language in Valente's Early Poetry

The problems central to Valente's reading of *Antigone* – the relation between the poet, his language, and the wider community – are taken up in many of the poems of his first six major collections of poetry, which run from 1955 to 1970. It is worth examining in detail the figurations of language through which Valente approaches these issues in this early half of his career, as the poems reveal certain tensions that I argue are central to his poetic project. On the one hand, Valente's describes a corrupt public language in terms of organic putrefaction, or, more usually, empty words that float in a vacuum. On the other, the language of truth is also figured in organic terms, with a healthy growth opposed to the rotten fruit of the language of lies. The desire to break with existing linguistic conventions and create new political horizons exists alongside a desire to restore the memory of generations to a society that experiences the traumas of war as a profound rupture. The poet longs for a poetic language that could found or celebrate a sense of community, but at the same time recognizes the dangers inherent in the jingoism that can cause a false sense of solidarity based on the exclusion of others. I argue that these contradictions, which are manifest in the collections of poetry up until the collection from 1976, *Interior con figuras* [Interior with figures], allow us to read the political import of the stylistic and thematic transformation visible in the poet's work from this collection on, and also allow us to explore the difficulties involved in writing poetry that is attentive to historical and political context, while at the same time negotiating a literary and philosophical tradition in which the desire to cast poetry as a "new mythology"<sup>8</sup> that would found

---

<sup>8</sup> In 1797 the writers of the *Oldest System Programme of German Idealism* – Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin – place the aesthetic at the height of all

a community in which each member identifies themselves with a communitarian essence entails the dangers of a totalitarian exclusion of otherness. I will begin with a reading of the poems in the first five collections that are given over to the theme of language and community.

In "La rosa necesaria" [The necessary rose] from Valente's first collection, *A modo de esperanza* [By way of hope], the poetic voice appeals for a language that would allow for the creation of a polis bound by shared experience:

La rosa no;  
la rosa sólo  
para ser entregada.

La rosa que se aísla  
en una mano, no;  
la rosa connatural al aire  
que es de todos.

La rosa no,  
ni la palabra sola.

La rosa que se da  
de mano a mano,  
que es necesario dar,  
la rosa necesaria.

---

possible knowledge, and claim that ideas must become sensual, a new mythology, in order to achieve universal progress: "The highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness are united like sisters only in beauty. The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. The people without aesthetic sense are our philosophers of the letter. The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy" (1999: 309). The ideal to achieve, through poetic language, a relation with the absolute and a communitarian identity is a constant throughout Valente's writings on poetry, with the proviso that this ideal is undermined by Valente's commitment to an alterity that would escape any subsumption under the category of absolute being or system.

La compartida así,  
la convivida,  
la que no debe ser  
salvada de la muerte,  
la que debe morir  
para ser nuestra,  
para ser cierta.

Plaza,  
estancia, casa  
del hombre,  
palabra natural,  
habitada y usada  
como el aire del mundo.  
(OCI: 85)

The rose no;  
the rose only  
to be given.

The rose that is kept  
in the hand, no;  
the rose that is natural as the air  
that is for all.

The rose no,  
nor the single word.

The rose that is given  
from hand to hand,  
which one needs to give,  
the necessary rose.  
That which is shared,  
lived in common,  
that which should not be  
saved from death  
that should die  
to be ours,  
to be certain.

Square

room, house  
of man,  
natural word,  
inhabited and used  
like the air of the world.

Despite the Heideggerean overtones of a language that would be “house of man,” what is described here is a language that exists as pure exchange, and which can circulate between members of a community metonymized as a “plaza” or town square. «La rosa necesaria» seems to demonstrate an adherence to the view expounded in the early 1950s by the poet Vicente Aleixandre, according to which poetry should be above all communicative, a view which Valente would later repudiate.<sup>9</sup> This stance is repeated, with a subtle variation, in the critique of representative democracy in the penultimate poem of the collection, «Acuérdate del hombre que suspira...» [Remember the man who breathes] (OCI: 98), opposes the everyday experiences of the subject who laughs and dies to the powerful, those who speak for others «en representación de todo el mundo» [in representation of everyone] (OCI: 100).

The latter poem opposes political discourse to the singular voice of the carnal human being who laughs, eats, and cries, but also, in allowing this singular voice to apostrophize the political world, brings into the public sphere an enunciative position that is usually denied

---

<sup>9</sup> Aleixandre's views were expressed in inaugural speech at *the Instituto de España* and later published under the title *Algunas caracteres de la nueva poesía española* (1955). Aleixandre's comments should be understood in the context of a contemporary debate within Spanish literature as to the communicative capacity of poetic language, a debate which was itself influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's well known arguments for the political inefficacy of poetry of the late 1940s. For the context and significance of these debates within the contemporary discourse on poetic language in the Spanish literary sphere, and Valente's protagonism in this regard, see Pozuelo Yvancos (2011: 653-667).

political speech, allowing us to see the fault line along which the division of the political and the non-political is drawn, implying that the truly political act would be similar to that of Butler's Antigone – the reformulation or the destruction of the division itself. It is from this perspective that we can understand the political task of the poet, who, as we are told the poem from *Breve son* [They are short], «Segunda homenaje a Isadore Ducasse» [Second homage to Isadore Ducasse], «debe ser más útil/ que ningún ciudadano de su tribu» [should be more useful/ than any citizen of the tribe] (OCI: 264), but is only so in regard to his knowledge of «diversas leyes implacables/ La ley de la confrontación con lo visible,/ el trazado de líneas divisorias» [diverse implacable laws/ The law of confrontation with the visible, / the drawing of dividing lines] (OCI: 264). That is, the poet's difficult task is to redraw the lines of the political and the non-political, and give voice to those who are refused the right to speak in the public sphere. The preceding poem, "El crimen" [The crime], pushes this questioning of enunciative position to its limit, as in it the voice that speaks is that of a murder victim who laments the absence of witnesses to the crime that ended his life. Reminiscent of Butler's description of the irruption of Antigone's speech in the political sphere, the poem is spoken from the position of a murder victim, the impossible position of enunciation that reflects a refusal of a political system that silences the powerless.

Valente's second collection, *Poemas a Lázaro* [Poems to Lazarus], is characterized by a more ambiguous attitude with regard to the capacity of poetic language to effect political change. In the "Primer poema" [First poem] that opens the collection the «odiosamente inútil» [hatefully useless] poetic voice asks «cuento los caedizos latidos/ de mi corazón y ¿qué importa?, /¿qué sed o qué agobiante/ vacío llenaré de un vacío más fiero» [I count the weak beatings/of my heart and who cares?, / what thirst or stifling/ vacuum will I fill with a more fierce vacuum] (OCI: 107). The political power of the poem in this context would only arise from the poet's absorption in the community:

.....  
Para vivir así,

para ser así anónimamente  
reavivida y cambiada,  
para que el canto al fin,  
libre de la aquejada  
mano, sea sólo poder,  
poder que brote puro  
como un gallo en la noche,  
como en la noche, súbito,  
un gallo rompe a ciegas  
el escuadrón compacto de las sombras.

To live like that  
to be anonymously  
revived and changed,  
so that the song can finally,  
free from the suffering  
hand, be only power,  
power that rises pure  
like a cockerel in the night,  
as in the night, suddenly,  
the cock blindly breaks  
the compact squadron of the shades.  
(OCI: 108)

“Objeto de poema” [Object of the poem] from the same collection, seems to flatly contradict the optimism with regard to poetic communication expressed in “La rosa necesaria” [The necessary rose] from the previous collection. Here, the “object” of the poem is hidden by an excess of words whose potential to deceive related precisely to that airy lightness that in the previous poem was their virtue: «Te pongo aquí cercado/ de palabras y nubes: me confundo» [I place you here/ surrounded by words and clouds: I confuse myself] (OCI: 133). There is a distrust of common language, and a Cavafy influenced distain for the public sphere: «...hablo/ de lugares communes, pongo/ mi vida en las

esquinas/ no guardo mi secreto» [I speak/ of common things, I put/ my like on the corners/ I don't keep my secret] (OCI: 133). In "La mentira" [The lie] this possibility of a language that would unite a community and express the truth is described in organic terms, a language that would «enarbolar la verdad» [enroot the truth] (OCI: 149) as opposed to the «palabras de globos hinchados» [words of bloated balloons] (OCI: 149) of the «mercadores de mentira» [merchants of lies] (OCI: 149). In the following poem, «Sobre el lugar del canto» [On the place of the song], language is again described with organic metaphors of generation:

.....  
La cólera terrible de la tierra  
que no alimenta la raíz del aire  
y se acuesta en la tierra boca abajo.

La palabra que nace sin destino.  
...  
Un fruto triste se desgarrá y cede  
más débil que su propio podredumbre.

The terrible rage of the earth  
which air's root does not feed  
and lies face down on the earth.

The word born without destination.

a sad fruit that tears itself apart and falls  
weaker than its own putrefaction  
(OCI: 150)

Already in these first two collections we can see a figurative tension that has a significance throughout Valente's work. It is expressed in the division between a figuration of poetic language figured as organic growth, a natural substance that unites a community, and a vision of

language as unbounded, a transparent substance the very lightness of which allows for linguistic exchange and thereby communitarian relation. Language conceived in this second sense can be understood either positively or negatively, as that which can freely circulate among citizens or as that which deceives, a sterile word which empties the town square, once the place for the celebration of community, but, in the context of the post-war, the site that reveals the destruction of solidarity.

"La memoria y los signos" [Memory and signs] again takes up the thematics of a new poetic language that would work against the corrosive language of the Spanish public sphere. "No puede a veces" [Sometimes it cannot] is pessimistic as to poetry's capacity for political regeneration. There is, perhaps, a time for poetry within a community that celebrates and sacralises itself through song, but equally, as the first line of the poem reads, «No puede a veces alzarse al canto lo que vive» [Sometimes life cannot raise itself to the song] (OCI: 216). In a recurrent trope in these poems, the failure of language is linked to the failure of generation, «la solidificación del tibio/fluido seminal en los lechos vacíos» [the solidification of tepid/ seminal fluid in the empty beds] (OCI: 216). The place of communitarian celebration is replaced by «vastos salones preparados/ para un ceremonial que no veremos» [vast rooms prepared/ for a ceremony that we will never see] (OCI: 216). The restorative function of poetry, the notion, dear to Wordsworth (spots of time) and Eliot (approach to meaning is approach to experience) is lost: "Y la memoria/ irreparable, hunde su raíz en lo amargo" [And memory/ irreparable, plunges its roots in bitterness] (OCI: 216).

The penultimate poem of this section, "Para oprobio del tiempo," is a devastating dissection of this time which makes the celebration of community in poetry an impossible task, and also the poem in Valente's work that makes most obvious reference to *Antigone*. Similar to the stench that betrays the corruption of Thebes, the broken world of the poem contains «...algo que había quedado sin sepultar/ y hedía» [something that had remained unburied/ and reeked] (OCI: 217). The public sphere is falsified; rather than a plaza where the community can convene, it has become «...un ensayo general/ con trajes, música, el director de escena/ y un telón espantoso cayendo de improviso/ antes de



terminar el tercer actoÈ [a generalized rehearsal/ with costumes, music, stage director/ and a horrible curtain falling without warning/ before the end of the third act] (OCI: 217). Behind the theatrical generations of royalty, the «...sucesión/ de los monarcos godos» [succession of the Gothic monarchs] there is something “roto o insepulto” [broken and unburied], something that remains to be said, but unsaid, diminishes language itself. But if this time is not propitious to poetry that might inspire an effective revolution in the present, there is the possibility that words, given their irrepressible and uncontrolled circulation, might in the future reach actors with the capacity to change the given order: «las palabras, que no nos pertenecen, se asocian como nubes/ que un día el viento precipita/ sobre la tierra/ para cambiar, no inútilmente, el mundo» [words, which do not belong to us, associate like clouds/ which one day the wind blows/ over the earth/ so as to change, not uselessly/ the world] (OCI: 219).

The aforementioned poems exemplify the sustained reflection on the relation between poetic language and community that is central to the first six major collections of Valente’s work. These collections combine a critique of the public language of Francoist Spain with the expression of the need to create a new poetic language that would lay bare the shortcomings of that social and political world, and at the same time serve in the foundation of a new communitarian self-understanding. The language of the regime is figured rhetorically as both a “vacío” and as a rotting corpse, the language of the empty plaza or the ceremonial room from which the public is excluded. Opposed to this is a poetic language, which is the organic language of generations, that which connects the present and the past, but also that which allows for the rupture of existing conditions, the intrusion of previously silenced voices into the public sphere, and the opening of horizons towards a future of political freedom. It is clear, however, that there are profound tensions within Valente’s approach to the political potential of poetic language and its relation to the wider community. The desire, as expressed in the essays on Antigone, to rupture existing linguistic convention and to include the excluded within the public sphere coexists with a more conservative desire that poetry restore the memory of

generations, framed in metaphors that are themselves exclusive – “del hijo al padre” [from the father to the son]. We might also ask ourselves whether there are dangers in the desire that poetry founds a community. Valente himself recognizes this danger in the “Canción de cuna” [Lullaby] included in *Breve son*, in which a motley group of Francoist dignitaries chant in unison:

- ¡Somos las fuerzas vivas,  
somos las fuerzas vivas,  
somos las fuerzas vivas  
de toda la nación!

We are the living force,  
we are the living force,  
we are the living force  
of the entire nation  
(OCI: 262)

The nationalist rhetoric invoked, and implicitly criticised, reminds us of the dangers inherent in the desire that poetry provide a foundational mythology for a community.

## **Community in the Later Poems**

Notwithstanding the complexity of Valente's discussions of language in his early essays, his figuration of language in the poems allows us to identify a major tension within his work in the division between language conceived as organic, natural, and constitutive of community, and language conceived as nihilistic and corrupt, rupturing a community that has lost connection with past generations. The call for a new language and for the inclusion of the voices of the excluded within public discourse is thereby framed in terms of a restoration of the public sphere in which the celebration of community would be the expression of a genealogical history in which each member identifies with an

original and total Word which absorbs him/her, «para ser así anónimamente/ reavivada y cambiada» [to be in this way anonymously/ revived and changed] (OCI: 108).

That this division leads to tensions within Valente's poetry is inevitable. To oppose a conception of poetic language that binds a community to its metaphysical foundation in an *antepalabra* to an empty language that, floating in a nihilistic void, fails to mean what it says puts the poet in a difficult position – either he accepts a loss of linguistic value and meaning, or he defends the existence of a metaphysical *arche-palabra*, thereby sustaining a totalizing discourse of community. The work of the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2009)<sup>10</sup>, allows for a reformulation of this opposition that might help us create an alternative to the path that Valente takes in his earlier works. For Esposito, modern thought on the relation between community and nihilism pits the presence of the *thing* of community against the destructive *nothing* of nihilism. His argument is that this opposition leads to insuperable dilemmas similar to those provoked in our reading of Valente's poetry – either we accept a complete loss of values or meaning or we base our truth claims on ungraspable, and ultimately indefensible, metaphysical categories.

What is necessary, for Esposito, is to recognize that nihilism and community are bound up with each other. Esposito identifies community with the *munus*, the sharing that constitutes community, the fact that to enter into community the subject must encounter the other, and that being in common is precisely this – the «sequence of alterations that never coalesce into a new identity» (Esposito 2009: 26). Subjects in community do not possess any quality that constitutes their essential identification with a communitarian totality; rather, their very dispossession, their alteration in the face of the other, constitutes their place within the community. Thus, «community is structurally

---

<sup>10</sup> Esposito's writings should be seen in the context of the development of a discourse on community that has developed since the early 1980s the main protagonists of which are Maurice Blanchot (1988), Jean Luc Nancy (1991), Giorgio Agamben (1993).

inhabited by an absence – of subjectivity, identity, and property» (Esposito 2009: 26-27). In fact, the very being of community is this absence, the gap that relates subjects in a common giving of themselves without compensation; as Esposito notes, the term *munus* refers to a gift given, that which exceeds reciprocity and remains always in excess with regard to exchange.

For Esposito, modern thought on community from Hobbes on errs in attempting to fill in this gap, creating the totalizing category of the sovereign in an attempt to guarantee the coherence of a community, but in effect annihilating the essence of community, the space of relation between subjects. The modern tradition replaces the gap with a direct relation between the individual and the sovereign, or the absolute identity of subjects united under the general will. But these visions of community ultimately create a more radical nihilism, as that which they are supposed to recreate, a non-historic golden age of total community, is non-existent. The communitarian attempt to retrieve the lost origin that would found community inevitably leads to violence, as the origin that would allow for absolute community is always unavailable, and ultimately the search for it leads to violence not only against those perceived as outside the community, but also to the self-destruction of community itself. For Esposito, the contemporary world, in which the lack of stable sense is exacerbated by globalization, allows for the opportunity to escape modern concepts of community. The sheer lack of sense that the constant barrage of mediatized representations provoke would allow us to ultimately let go of the illusion of transcendent categories that would ground our understanding of the world, and would reveal a «world reduced to itself, able to be simply what it is» (Esposito 2009: 35). Our communities would be the passage «between this immense devastation of sense and the necessity that each singularity, each event, each fragment of existence must be in itself meaningful» (*ibid.*:35). I take Esposito here to mean that, in the absence of illusions of transcendent grounding of our communities, we have the opportunity to reappraise their constitutive lack as something other than privation.

It is in this context that we can read the relation between community and poetry in Valente's later work, which stretches from *Interior con figuras* to his final *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*, and in which the references to political and communitarian themes diminish, and his poetic language becomes more abstract and self-referential. This movement from a more obvious engagement with political themes, whether through direct reference to political events and cultural decay, or through the collage poems in which the most dangerous clichés that lent support to the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are laid bare, does not mean that Valente completely discontinues his exploration of the relation between poetic language and community. Paradoxically, it might be best to explore the notion of community in Valente's later work through a consideration of that which is generally taken to be its opposite, the emptiness of the "vacío."

Esposito identifies Martin Heidegger as the thinker who first opened the question of the interconnection of community and nothingness. Esposito reads Heidegger's essay from 1950, "The Thing," as the first recognition that the thing is constituted in its essence as nothingness, and that this intermingling of the thing and the nothing is relevant to a discussion of community. Heidegger's essay turns on his famous example of the jug, the everyday thing which is constituted by a hollow space. The absence that allows that allows the jug to exist as a thing that can be filled with liquid serves to show that an object can have as its essence the void. Heidegger goes on to relate this void with the etymological roots of donation, the *munus*, which he then relates to the Germanic roots of the word "thing," which signify reunion or meeting place. This *munus*, or giving, is associated, in Heidegger's essay, with the pouring of liquid from the jug, an act that, for Heidegger, constitutes a "gathering." If contemporary nihilism, for Heidegger, is the destruction of "nearness," the flattening of all entities to a distanceless homogeneity in a globalized media culture, the giving of the void that occurs in the pouring of liquid from the jug is the maintenance of "nearness," the distance in relation that constitutes community.

It is significant, in this regard, that one of the earliest poems in which Valente takes up the theme of emptiness or the "vacío," "El

cántaro" [The pitcher] from *Poemas a Lázaro*, seems to be inspired by Heidegger's discussion of the jug in "The Thing":

El cántaro que tiene la suprema  
realidad de la forma,  
creado de la tierra  
para que el ojo pueda  
contemplar la frescura.  
El cántaro que existe conteniendo,  
hueco de contener se quebraría  
inánime. Su forma  
existe sólo así,  
sonora y respirada.  
                                    El hondo cántaro  
de clara curvatura,  
bella y servil:  
el cántaro y el canto.

The pitcher that has the supreme  
reality of form,  
created from the earth  
so that the eye can  
contemplate its freshness.  
The pitcher that exists containing,  
empty of containing it would break  
lifeless. Its form  
only exists in this way,  
resonant and breathed.  
                                    The deep pitcher  
of clear curvature,  
beautiful and useful:  
the pitcher and the song.  
(OCI: 134)

In a conceptually difficult pun, reminiscent of Heidegger's tortured musings on the word "nothing," the equivocal significance of the word

“hueco” is used to imply that the “cántaro” would not exist if it was void of the void, if it lacked emptiness: “hueco de contener se quebraría/inánime” (OCI: 134). The “cántaro,” which we know, through paronomasia, is also the “canto,” without an animating breath that is also a void would be “inánime,” and further, would not fulfil the classical duty to be both beautiful and useful. In the context of Heidegger’s discussions in “The Thing,” the emptiness that is the essence of the “cántaro” constitutes the resistance of the poem to the destruction of the distance of relation that constitutes community.

From this perspective, the second half of Valente’s career, in which he develops a discourse based on the series of terms related to absence – silence, nothingness, emptiness – would not be a solipsistic turning from communitarian issues towards a hermetic discourse that refuses communication. Rather, the development of Valente’s poetry on this trajectory in some ways reflects a radicalization of the communitarian impulse.

This tendency is nowhere more evident than in the erotic poetry of the later collections. We can understand the relevance of this poetry to the conceptualization of community if we turn to one of the key works in the development of the discourse of community, Jean Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*. For Nancy, if lovers reveal something about community it is not that they form a special bond above society, but because they «expose that fact that communication is not communion» (Nancy 1991: 37). Lovers are at the extreme limit of communication, touching each other in the joy of intimacy, but nevertheless know of no absolute communion, and are as such something like the exemplars of community. Literature, for Nancy, would be the writing of this speechless co-appearance of beings in the singularity of loving relation:

There is community, there is sharing, and there is the exposition of this limit. Community does not lie beyond the lovers, it does not form a larger circle within which they are contained: it traverses them, in a tremor of ‘writing’ wherein the literary work mingles with the most simple public exchange of speech. Without such a trait traversing the kiss, sharing it, the kiss itself is as despairing as community is abolished (Nancy 1991: 40).

The poetry of the second half of Valente's career is marked by the presence of this erotic sharing of limits. "El deseo era un punto inmóvil" [Desire was an immobile point] from *Interior con figuras* is an outstanding example:

Los cuerpos se quedaban del lado solitario del amor  
como si uno a otro se negasen sin negar el deseo  
y en esa negación un nudo más fuerte que ellos mismos  
indifinidamente los uniera.

¿Qué sabían los ojos y las manos,  
qué sabía la piel, qué retenía un cuerpo  
de la respiración del otro, quién hacía nacer  
aquella lenta luz inmóvil  
como única forma del deseo?

Their bodies remained in the solitude of love  
as if they denied each other, without denying desire,  
and in that denial  
a knot stronger than each  
infinitely bound them.

What could eyes or hands or skin know,  
what did the body retain  
of the other's breath,  
who created  
that slow, still light,  
the single shape of desire?  
(OCI: 356)

The lovers in the poem negate themselves so that the ecstatic relation that they share becomes the expression of their love. The "lenta luz inmóvil" that inhabits the space of relation is the form of their desire, that which binds them in the separation of unknowing eyes, hands, body, and breath.



The collection *Mandorla* can be seen as dedicated entirely to this space of relation. The Mandorla refers to the space of intersection between two circles, which in the Christian tradition was the space in which images of Christ were placed, reflecting the interpenetration of the divine and the flesh, but which Valente frames in terms of erotic experience. Here, transcendence does not refer to an otherworldly realm, but to the impossibility of subsuming the other to the self even in the moment of greatest intimacy. This is the space of relation that is produced in the intimate and joyful separation of lovers, as described in "Borde":

Tu cuerpo baja  
lento hacia mi deseo.  
Ven.  
No llegues.  
Borde  
donde dos movimientos  
engendran la veloz quietud del centro  
Your body lowers  
slowly towards my desire.  
Come  
You don't arrive.  
Border  
where two movements  
engender the rapid quietude of the centre.  
(OCI: 411)

Here, lovers are the exemplars of community as the encounter between singularities that are mutually exposed, giving of themselves in an excessive relation to the other without identification or recompense.

## Conclusion

It is in this context that we can read the desacralization of the Catholic Mass in the opening poem of the collection from 1989, *El fulgor* [The brightness]. In this poem, the Mass does not culminate in the presence of the divine in the sacramental wine, but the wine itself is filled with the power of negativity, the «insidioso fondo» [insidious depths] of a «dios incognito» [unknown God] that reduces the things of this world to «ceniza» [ash]. Valente's desacralization of the Catholic Mass is a description of a world in which common worship makes way for the rituals of the spectacle, in which any grounding for our language is lost amidst a world of empty chatter. Valente sometimes responds to this ungrounding of language by attempting to reground language in the *antepalabra*, the Word before the word, that appears in various guises throughout his work, and which remains present in many of his declarations on poetry right up to his death. The difficulty of such a stance in terms of community, and in terms of Valente's commitment to those who are excluded from nationalistic communities, is clear – the Word before the word is, like the foundations of community that Esposito identifies, a hierarchical and inevitably exclusive grounding of the communal. Valente's poetry, however, along with the various essays in his career dedicated to figures of ungrounding – silence, nothingness, emptiness – make clear the complex tensions that underlie his, and modern poetry's, relation to politics and community. Rather than understanding the turn to a discourse on silence and absence as a turn away from communitarian themes, a nihilistic quiescence in the face of global capitalism, we can, with Esposito, attempt to see aspects of Valente's later poetry as an approach to a thought of community in the context of the age of the spectacle and the destruction of stable meaning brings that goes beyond a nostalgic desire for absolute unity. As Esposito writes:

Community is nothing other than the border, or transition, between this immense devastation of sense and the necessity that each singularity, each event, each fragment of existence must be in

itself meaningful. It refers back to the character, both singular and plural, of an existence freed from any presupposed, or imposed, or postponed sense; of a world reduced to itself, able to be simply what it is: a planetary world, without direction or cardinal points. A nothing-else-than-world. And it is this nothing in common which is the world that associates us in the condition of exposition to the hardest absence of sense and, at the same time, to the opening of a sense yet to be thought (Espisito 2009: 35).

Beyond the suffering for the logos, the pathological desire for the foundational Word that characterizes many of Valente's statements on poetry, the limits of the kiss that Valente describes in his later works define the constitutive nothing of community, thereby opening, beyond myth, the possibility to begin to think new ways of being with others. In the words of Valente's short poem from the collection *Mandorla*:

Cuando ya no nos queda nada,  
el vacío del no quedar  
podría ser al cabo inútil y perfecto

When nothing remains  
the emptiness of this non-remaining  
could in the end be useless and perfect  
(OCI: 423).

## Works cited

- Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community*, Trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota, 1993.
- Blanchot, Maurice, *The Unavowable Community*, Trans, Pierre Joris. Bar-rytown, NY, Station Hill, 1988.
- Butler, Judith, *Antigones Claim*, New York, Columbia UP, 2000.
- Esposito, Roberto, "Community and Nihilism", *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 5. 1 (2009): 24-36.
- Rodríguez Fer, Claudio, *Valente Vital (Ginebra, Saboya, París)*, Ed. Santi-ago de Compostela. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2014.
- Irigaray, Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell UP, 1985.
- Lefebvre, Henri, *Le Langage Et La Société*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.
- Moretti, Franco, and Dominique Pestre. "Bankspeak." *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 75-99.
- Nancy, Jean Luc, *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis, MN, U of Minnesota, 1991.
- Pozuelo Yvancos, José María, *Las Ideas Literarias (1214-2010)*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2011.
- Steiner, George, *Antigones*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Söderbäck, Fanny, *Feminist Readings of Antigone*. Albany, State U of New York, 2010.
- Zambrano, Maria. *La tumba de Antígona y otros textos sobre el personaje trágica*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2012.
- Valente, José Angel, *Obras Completas*. Ed. Andrés Sánchez Robayna. Vol. I, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006. [OCI]
- Valente, José Angel, *Obras Completas*. Ed. Andrés Sánchez Robayna. Vol. II, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2008. [OCII]

## The author

Manus O'Dwyer

Manus O'Dwyer has recently completed a doctoral thesis on the work of Spanish poet José Ángel Valente at the University of Santiago de Compostela and is currently lecturer of Spanish Literature at the University of Liverpool.

**Email:** manus.od@gmail.com

## **The paper**

Date sent: 31/01/2017

Date accepted: 15/04/2017

Date published: 31/05/2017

## **How to quote this paper**

O'Dwyer, Manus, "Poetry and Community in the Work of José Ángel Valente", *Longing and Belonging/ Désir et Appartenance*, Eds. Massimo Fusillo, Brigitte Le Juez, Beatrice Seligardi, *Between*, VII.13 (2017), <http://www.betweenjournal.it/>